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MICHELANGELO

The Taddei Tondo

Lent by the Royal Academy of Arts

LONDON

MICHELANGELO: *THE TADDEI TONDO*

The subject of this exhibition is a single work by Michelangelo (b.1475; d.1564), the *tondo*, or circular relief, of the Virgin and Child with the Young St. John owned by the Royal Academy of Arts. The relief is shown in conjunction with two preliminary drawings by Michelangelo, lent by the British Museum, a drawing made from it by Raphael (1483-1520), lent by the Louvre, and reproductions of related works by Michelangelo.

The tondo dates from one of the most fertile periods in the artist's life. In 1501 he returned to Florence from Rome, where he had completed the *Bacchus*, now in the Bargello, and the *Pietá* in St. Peter's. Between this date and 1505, when he was summoned to the papal court, he carved the colossal David, now in the Accademia in Florence (commissioned August 1501; completed January 1504) and received two other official commissions, one for the fresco of the Battle of Cascina for the Palazzo della Signoria, and the other for twelve statues of Apostles for the Cathedral. In 1505 when he went back to Rome the Battle fresco was unfinished and only one of the statues of Apostles, the *St. Matthew* now in the Accademia in Florence, had been begun. In addition to these official projects he worked, privately, on four Madonnas. The first of them was a painting, the *Doni Madonna* in the Uffizi in Florence [A]; the second was a marble statue, the *Bruges Madonna*, which is still in the church for which it was commissioned, Notre Dame at Bruges [B]; and the third and fourth were marble reliefs, the *Pitti tondo* in the Bargello in Florence [C] and the present relief, which is known, from the name of its first owner, as the *Taddei tondo*. These four works were produced in close proximity. The *Doni Madonna* probably dates from 1503-4 and the two reliefs from 1504-5. The *Bruges Madonna* was despatched to Flanders in 1506.

Given the short time interval in which they were produced, it is not surprising that some continuity of thinking should be evident in the four works. In the painting, and in the two reliefs, the Virgin is depicted in full-length—in the *Pitti tondo* with knees drawn up and in the *Doni Madonna* and the *Taddei tondo* with legs extended on the ground. In all three works the use of a circular frame compels the artist to compress the central group. In the *Doni Madonna* the main figures are grouped together as a vertical unit in the centre of the panel, whereas in the two reliefs they are distributed over the whole field. The painting is lit internally from the left, and the two reliefs are both designed to be lit externally from the same side. At first

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sight it may seem puzzling that an experiment which was begun in paint should be continued in relief. In the fifteenth century, however, circular reliefs of the Virgin and Child were commonly included in sepulchral monuments (a painted gesso reproduction of one such marble relief is included in this exhibition [D]), and they seem to have supplied the impulse under which the *Taddei* and *Pitti tondi* were carved. But Michelangelo's Madonnas are incomparably greater works of art. The level of interpretation is more profound, the formal thinking is more adventurous and the style is permeated by the influence of the antique.

In the relief here exhibited, the Child Christ is adapted from a figure in a Roman Medea sarcophagus [E]. If the *tondo* and sarcophagus are compared, it can be seen that the figure is closely transcribed in Michelangelo's relief, but has been turned clockwise so that the left leg is vertical. The Child Christ could be represented in this way only if the active pose were so motivated that it seemed to form a natural feature of the scene. For that reason the Child is shown shrinking from a goldfinch held out to Him by the young St. John. There are no drawings by Michelangelo for the figure of Christ, but two sheets in the British Museum contain studies for the Baptist [F and G]. In one of them he is shown bending forwards, in a pose that conforms to the circular frame of the relief, and in two more he is depicted in the same position as in the marble, with his left arm extended and his right hand crossed under it. The other studies of children on these sheets probably relate to an earlier version of the composition, when the Child was to be represented with back turned and the Baptist was to be shown in profile to the left.

One of the sheets in the British Museum also includes a study for the *Bruges Madonna*, which must have been carved at the same time as the Taddei relief. Had work on the *Taddei tondo* been continued, it would doubtless have been brought to the same state of completion as this statue. In its present state it offers a vivid picture of Michelangelo's technique. The intended level of the background is indicated beside the Virgin's veil, the only place in which the marble is excavated to its full depth. The figure of the Baptist is no more than blocked out, and the face has not yet been defined; its state is closely similar to that of the Child Christ in the *Pitti tondo* in Florence. The feet of Christ are barely indicated, but the head and body are more fully worked up, and are covered by a fine mesh of lines, the penultimate technical stage by which the smooth surface of the finished sculptures was reached [H and J]. Michelangelo was a sculptor of great delicacy as well as of great strength, as can be seen from the carving of the Virgin's headdress and of her throat.

When Michelangelo left Florence in 1505, he presented the *tondo* to Taddeo Taddei, one of the principal Florentine patrons of the time. It is mentioned in Vasari's life of Michelangelo (1550) and in the oration delivered by Benedetto Varchi after the sculptor's death (1564); but since it was in private hands it exercised comparatively little influence. To Raphael, however, who was in Florence between 1504 and 1508 and was patronised by Taddei, it was freely available. At this time he made a drawing from the *tondo*, now in the Louvre, which is included in the present exhibition [K]. This is the first occasion since the drawing was made on which Michelangelo's relief and Raphael's copy have been juxtaposed. Raphael's interest at this time lay in the posture of the Child, and in two immediately succeeding drawings in the British Museum [L] it was first modified and then reversed till it assumed the form of the *Bridgewater Madonna* at Edinburgh. Later, about 1510, in Rome, Raphael produced a painted *tondo*, the *Alba Madonna* in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, in which his thoughts returned to the Virgin in Michelangelo's relief.

The relief remained in the Casa Taddei in Florence until the early nineteenth century when it was purchased by the French collector Wicar, who sold it in 1823 to Sir George Beaumont for £1,000. When Beaumont died in 1827, he left the *tondo* to his wife, enjoining that, unless otherwise bequeathed by her, it should pass to the Royal Academy of Arts. Lady Beaumont died in 1830, and the *tondo* became the property of the Royal Academy towards the end of June of that year. From that time until 1868, when the Academy moved to Burlington House, the *tondo* was shown in the Academy's rooms at the National Gallery. A free pen and ink sketch of the relief by John Constable, R.A. [M], which has recently been acquired by the Academy, is inscribed: "Sketched by Mr. Constable . . . . July 1 1830." Beaumont was the friend and patron of Constable, and it seems probable that the Royal Academy owes the gift of the *tondo* to this link.

The *Taddei tondo* is the only work by Michelangelo in marble in this country, and it has been placed on temporary exhibition in the Museum, with the related drawings, and in more favourable light conditions than those in which it is generally seen, in order that through it a wide public should gain contact with the mind of the greatest artist of the Renaissance.